

## DISCOURSE ON IMMIGRANTS' PROBLEM OF ADAPTION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN NEIL BISSOONDATH'S THE SOUL OF ALL GREAT DESIGNS

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### ABSTRACT

The trend of (im) migration is very popular across the globe which raises concern about the problem of assimilation, adaption, acceptance by the 'host' society etc. for the people who have become the part of diaspora (un) willingly. Mostly, the situation is always difficult for the (im) migrants to get success in other countries and as a result adjustment is only the remedy. Even to sustain original identity is a big challenge because the 'others' have rejected them which propels their identity crisis. To fit in the main stream of the society the (im) migrants have to adjust a lot. Gradually the predicament leads them to feel alienation even after so many hard efforts since their second generation wouldn't carry on the tradition and culture of the homeland. On the other part the second generation feels clipped wings. Neil Bissoondath, a reputed Canadian author has rightly projected such issues in his latest work of fiction- *The Soul of All Great Designs* (2008)

**KEYWORDS:** Adaption, Alienation, Culture, Dilemma, Freedom, Identity, Immigration, Secret

### INTRODUCTION

Neil Bissoondath's *The Soul of All Great Designs* (2008) is a story of Alec, a young independent businessman who is fascinated about classic cars and really passionate about interior decoration, has created artificial persona of a 'gay' only to get professional success in the field of fashion where it is anticipated that only 'gays' are suitable for by the society. His life is full of lies and his wish to keep those as 'secrets', leads him to compromise even with basic feelings and emotion that every human beings desire. Alec's vision to live his life on whims and wishes, totally different from his parents' lives which had happened out of circumstances, makes him to cheat his parents as well as his love-"Sue" or Sumintra, a daughter of Indian immigrant in Canada, who feels trapped between Western culture and Indian traditions. To remove loneliness of teenage like other Canadian youth and experience some adventure in life, secretly from her parents Sue falls in love with Alec and enjoys sensual pleasure but when the time comes to admit their relationship in public, both hesitates. Finally, Alec doesn't respond positively to the risky chance of Sue in which she leaves the home as well as her parents for the sake of long time relationship with her loving partner who considers it as 'a great loss' to his professional success rather personal which is solely based on the pretensions and lies and to keep those 'secrets' only to himself after confession to the 'self' and "Sue", he kills her only with the fear of his 'secrets' being used for thrill.

The whole story runs around the artificial persona created by Alec, and his struggle to sustain it against the circumstances. For instance, with Caroline, a real estate agent and 'Sue' or 'Sumintra' his feelings of a normal man become heavy on the artificial persona, and finally how he has managed to deal with all the things to live his own life on his own terms. The novel is divided into three parts – first about Alec; his childhood, his interest, his parent and his so

called success in the field of interior decoration whereas the second one talks about an Indian immigrants' daughter- Sumintra or 'Sue' who feels shackled in between Indian thoughts and Western culture. And third part where both-Alec and Sue meets, falls in love, exchanges sensual pleasure- all secretly and struggles to hide their relationship from the world as they have to lose lots of things if they would be exposed. The whole novel develops with intermingling one secret to others and the sense of getting thrill of exchanging it with one-another and finally it ends with the attempts to hide those 'secrets' from others, and how to keep it only to their 'soul' which impels the readers to accept that such souls have 'great designs'.

## CHANGE IN THE PRESENCE OF IMMIGRANTS

While searching for an apartment in middle of the town for his company office, Alec comes across with real estate hike in Canada as 'nothing available' and such change in the nature of the city is because of the flooding recent immigrants.

Over the years, the city had achieved success beyond its dreams. The big, clean, safe, prosperous, slightly provincial city I'd grown up in had become immensely rich, a powerhouse of economic activity fuelled by banks, business, the stock exchange, major- league sports teams and the burgeoning beehive industriousness of hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants. [Neil Bissoondath, *The Soul of All Great Designs*, 25]

The arrival of so many immigrants, not only has changed the city in shape and hike in real estate price but also many changes take place at social level due to multi-culturalism of the city as well as of the country. For instance, the city breaths new energy and the old sense of city begin to shred. Even certain neighbourhoods are not so safe after the dark. The policemen have to wear flak jackets while on patrolling, and thick traffic, random shootings have become common. It is like a simple part of the price to be paid for living in a city where all manner of desire can be satisfied, where the streets are occupied with limousines, well-dressed crowds shell out hundreds of millions for cultural centres and the extravaganzas of one kind or another needs to fill them. The city looks new and slightly maniac where the smell of money is much stronger than the smell of exhaust fumes. It is the money which can buy anything like beauty. While searching for an apartment Alec meets the manger, an immigrant from central Europe, who asks Alec to give bribe in shape of his talent of interior designing by redecorating the old lobby which can enable him, to ask for 20% hike in rent from the tenants, though the building is under the rent control.

## ADJUSTMENT AS IMMIGRANTS

At Lambton where The Classic Car Association has done arrangements for gathering in the park for the people who wish to come with their vehicle for admiration from others, Alec meets "Sue" who comes with her father in van-fully loaded with food and refreshment for the people. Sue's father Manohar is simply fascinated about the world of automobile and cars, though it is different from his profession of supplying food and refreshment to the people who work at various construction sites or gather at informal auto shows in small parks and towns. Manohar and his wife immigrated to Canada from Calcutta in India, and they have to suffer a lot in another country as Manohar's qualification is not worthy:

...being a civil engineer whose qualification proved so useless on his arrival in this country that he has had to support his family by selling food from a van. [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 79]

In such critical situation, he has started smoking, secretly from his wife, but only known to his daughter-Sumintra who has opposite views for tobacco, as she prefers alcohol. It is not only Manohar, whose qualification has degraded, but Sumintra's schoolmate Rima's parents- the Prasads have also faced the same problem as Mr. Prasad, Rima's father, an electrical engineer with Hydro and Dr. Prasad, her mother, an obstetrician whose qualifications and experience are useless only because of immigration to Canada from India. Moreover, the Prasads have to run an Indian restaurant in the mall, serving their subdivision. Even Canadians like Kelly-Ann or Kelly, Sue's friend has to adapt with the situation to shape her career as she had completed degree in architecture but has to satisfy herself by designing shopping malls only. Sue knows Kelly for almost four years, became friend at university from where Sumintra had left the architecture for studying English literature.

### CLIPPED WINGS OF THE SECOND GENERATION OF IMMIGRANTS

Kelly is the representative of Canadian youth who is carefree and wants to live life on her own choice whereas Sumintra and Rima represent Indian girls in Canada who are controlled by their parents with Indian mentality. Sumintra's mother is a typical Indian mother expecting her daughter to behave like a sincere girl who should possess high qualification like as Rima- Dr. and Mr. Prasad's daughter, an intelligent and scholar student who is expected to do serious research in Chemistry or getting degrees at U of T (University of Toronto), not only by her parents but also by the community of Indian immigrants. Partially Rima and Sumintra, represent Indian origin girls in Canada, who have to suffer a lot in the name of family and community honour and also have to pass their lives by repressing their dreams, under the constant restraint of their parents like a 'prisoned innocent'. It seems that there is no right of choice or freedom in Canada which is true for Indian girls from the instance of Rima who felt in love with a white boy- Jewish, and when her parents come to know, they send her back to India and take her passports of two citizenship away as she can't return to Canada again only for saving the family and community honour.

Everybody at temple knows what happened. Their honour was at stake, and the honour of our community. They could not let it pass. They had to protect the family's honour. It is not like here. A child does something bad and the parents can still hold their heads high. It is known in our community that some families have gone much farther than Mr. and Dr. Prasad. A man can be driven to physical violence against those he loves most when they betray him. Usually, it is hushed up. We hate to wash our dirty laundry in public. But that dirty laundry must be dealt with. Mr. and Dr. Prasad dealt with it in the most humane way possible. Nobody can fault them for that, daughter. [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 132-133]

Even Sumintra finds herself in difficulty as she is in Canada and still has to follow Indian tradition and way of living. For instance when she calls her parents as 'guys', they rebuke her. Moreover, her mother strictly instructs her to keep distance from BMWs- Blacks, Muslims and Whites which shows their racist attitude. Even they hesitate to permit 'Sue' to go for party at Kelly's apartment after graduation by giving excuse of security. Actually they fear that their daughter would be total western if she is in touch with them and then it would be more difficult for them to handle her. To protect their daughter from so-called dirty world around, they insist an Indian groom for her and for that they force her to take decision out of Mohan, son of Mr. Arjun Kumar, an Indian immigrant and a successful merchant of traditional Indian clothes in Canada, and a pharmacist and aged widower Indian Professor, a nuclear physicist, as she is running out of choices. She believes that whoever will be her husband would be the person who gets to know her and accepts her as she is and the life will bring that person, but it is not accepted by her parents who say that it deviates Indian traditional way of

living life where the children live with parents till they get married, and their life partners are chosen by their parents, not by themselves: “It’s just the way things are here. They’re not like us, the kids living with the parents till they get married. It’s just different way of doing things” [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 122]

It is like an attack on Sumintra’s freedom of choice and rights of individual, as she can’t live her own life on her wishes, though she has dreams. Sumintra’s condition is so struggling that she is kept between parents’ Indian world and her world of choice i.e. western world where her dreams clashes. Her efforts of adjustment take her away from looking her needs, and desires and dreams and so whenever she feels helpless to control her imagination or fancies to conquer her body, she uses sex toys like Kelly or other Canadian teenagers, to fulfill their desires. She rightly accepts that: the body is the servant of the imagination. What takes root in the mind manifests itself in the flesh. [*The Soul of All Great Designs* 75] She, sometimes tries to experience real sensual pleasure like Kelly who has lots of boyfriends and used to go for one-night-stand with them, hence once she joins Kelly at party where Sue meets a white- British young guy-Dan whose offers for pleasure, rejected by Indian heart, and in reply, she got insult as ‘Pakistani girl’ or a ‘cunt’ though she is beautiful.

It is a great sense of insult for her as it seems that she has identity like ‘cunt’. Even Sumintra is facing identity problem as her parents have given her name - Sumintra because her mother’s cousin – Sumintra was so much helpful to them when they came to Canada, and who died in 9-11(World Trade Centre Attack) attack with her twins daughters - Pria and Vasti. Her mother expects Sue to live the life of Sumintra as sincere, modest and helpful lady, which disturbs her a lot: “Sometimes I feel as if Mamu wants me to live Sumintra’s life for her, and maybe the twins’ lives, too” [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 105]. She feels that she is not living her own life in totality for ‘Sumintra’s life’ though she likes to live as ‘Sue’. Her father consoles her that she is living her life and not anyone else’s but nobody’s life is ever complete: Nobody’s life ever is, Sumintra. As you get older, you will come to understand that we parcel pieces of our life out to others. Not to do so would be to defy God”. [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 106] Sue has decided to adjust with a job in accounting department of an architectural firm, recommended by Kelly, though not of choice, it is well-paid. She convinces her parents for her stay at Kelly’s apartment for that job.

She believes that success can be defined not by what you have to do but by what you choose to do.(84) She has taken this decision- on the one hand to live her life in freedom and other hand she feels a sense of guilt when she comes to know that her father had borrowed money from Mr. Kumar, whose interest rates are lesser than bank’s to pay the fees of her university courses and other expenses to make her happy though they live struggling life after immigration in another country during transmission. She smokes with her father on the way to auto show, to reduce stress or sense of guilt by reviewing that life is an expensive proposition and her parents started as ‘under-ducks’ and she hasn’t helped them while studying. When she was at home and her other classmates were doing part-time job. In reality she wishes to run away from the unexpected meetings arranged for her to choose her future husband, mostly they are not of her ‘type’. For Sumintra, the whole question of ‘type’ is a complicated one as she merely wants adventures in the presence of man in her life.

## SLACKNESS AND IDENTITY CRISIS

Sumintra also feels neglected in Canada not only at personal but also at social level which is symbolically is shown by the scene on dinner table where she has knife in one and fork in other hand to eat Indian food means if she has to follow only Indian tradition even in Canada then what is the need of ‘fork’ and ‘knives’.

While mailing to Alec, Sue hesitates to use salutation like 'Dear Alec' after only one date, shows her Indian roots which do not allow her to cross the boundaries hastily but her understanding of respect to the value of Indian culture is much larger and less stricter than her mother. Meanwhile Sue has to face a bachelor pharmacist who glares her 'shamelessly' and she thinks that Alec is far better guy for her. She wants to continue her relation with Alec as she feels loneliness like Alec but none of them accepts it: "...he is lonely but will not admit to it. It occurs to her that the same thing could be said about her" [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 170] Though Kelly is her best friend, Sue shares only favourable matter about him like only his name (which is not real) and also keeps it secret from her parents who wouldn't like Alec's colour i.e. white. Kelly considers Sue's parents medieval and tells her that she would keep an eye on her in place of her parents especially when she is with Alec. For Sue, it is another pair of eyes, after her parent who will spy on her means her life has become a kind of film to watch or spectacle, as amusing to Kelly as she has long been spectacle for Sue before sometime. The situation in which Sue has to suppress her ambition and dreams from the very beginning which leads her to live life like a drifting boat:

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a stewardess, they don't even call them that anymore, do they- and a guide at the U N and a ballerina, and an actress. Architecture, English literature, the degree hanging on the wall of her parents' house: nothing ever shook the sense that she was filling time, waiting for the day when something – the thing – would fall into her lap and shape her days, her weeks, her years, her formless life.' [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 18]

However, Kelly remarks that a drifting boat is not always ends up on some shore, because sometime it sinks at the bottom of the sea, but Sue wants to be optimistic and she is looking for a place where she can be with her real self, not with adjusted or artificial personality: "I'm looking for a place where I can be myself, just myself, all the time" [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 174]. By smelling something dangerous, Kelly advises her to be cautious but Sue chooses to be less harmful than being so much careful every time for her life. To get more affection and focus from Alec, Sue concocts and tells a story to Alec that she had an elder sister named Sumintra who was died in plane crash and her body had never found, hence her parents in deep grief changed her name to hers i.e. Sumintra and from then, they expect from Sue to live like her and due to this Sue senses the loss of original identity with incompleteness of life: "...I'm me and my sister, I have to live for both of us –for them." [*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 176] As Indians, Sue's parents expect her to marry with Indian guy, have a bunch of kids and look after them until they get old, like her elder sister Sumintra. Actually, Sue has shared all the real problems, she faces in her life, but in different way by giving birth to her alter-ego in the name of her elder sister Sumintra. She tells Alec that her parents didn't know about their relationship and also won't allow or accept it, so they have to end their relationship.

Sue's temporary job of fact checking is about to end and Kelly doubts about Sue's further plan to maintain contact with Alec so she tells her that she has to make choice out of two- keep relation with Alec and tell her parents about him or get rid of him and her parents wouldn't know about him in future. Through 'Ice Cube' game, Kelly warns Sue to quit the drama but Sue is in dilemma as Alec is her 'desire' or we can say he fulfills all her 'desire'. She has love and a kind of madness- invasive, obsessive, irresistible for Alec-for his another personality which is not of a 'gay' so she can't convince herself to betray Alec for the love of her parents and vice-versa. For the first time, Sue is not ready to take decision as per Kelly's advice because she finds that the game- making the choice out of two- parents or Alec, guarantees nothing to her; A game: the choice commits her to nothing. (*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 185) It is only love for Alec that leads her to

make decision, not a choice where she is taking a risky 'chance' by arranging meeting of Kelly with Alec, and then she takes him to her parents for confession of her love in front of them.

The consequences are unimaginable as Sue wouldn't be able to 'see' Alec again in her rest of life if her parents react like the Prasads with their daughter – Rima. Even Alec is also suspicious of being caught in Kelly's presence as they are from the same field- architecture/designing or he would be spice for daily newspaper with headlines that a gay having affair with a girl which can ruin his whole reputation. Sue is ready to make such risky decision as her parents have made up their minds to marry her with an aged professor Motilal Mukherjee, a widower, son of Manohar's mentor at engineering and nuclear physicist means a perfect Indian groom with high qualification and reputation though he has a ten years old daughter. The excuse given by Sue's mother for that choice is that Sumintra is having less or no choices- "Sumintra! You are running out of choice". (*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 193) For Sue, it is her parents who are running out of choice.

From keen observation, Alec comes to know that Sue's parents are deflated when she stepped down from architect to literature – no medicine or the sciences, and the teaching profession is not in high demand in the marriage market. Sue has stolen her passports and finally decides to run away with Alec after his meeting with Kelly at Den. Now, Alec is having dilemma whether to stick to his persona – gay or accepts Sue's love and leaves all behind. It is true that everyone strives to be real, genuine, true to them (their souls) but for Alec the most useful advice- Be true to the role you're stuck with.... Think before you act (*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 201-202) in which we, all human beings are players of a great drama scripted by the God, so he decides to stick by his role which is precious to him.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sue has made the situation untenable. Alec is looking for a way out. Once again when he realizes that Sue is firm and anxious to take their relationship in public, he offers her a ride in his car to the deserted streets in darkens nights. On the way he expresses his helplessness of coming out in public as he has to lose much: "I'm saying that I can't do what you want to do. I have too loose". (*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 216) It's shocking news for Sue as she has lost almost everything – her parents, house, friend and now Alec. Still Alec is in dilemma whether to tell Sue about the secrets of his life, only known to him, but as having some feeling/love for Sue, Alec also a risky chance and shares all the secrets – his real name, real profession (not a house painter), his parents, his inheritance, his company, his persona and also about hotel rooms and the girls from the agency, about his arrival at the Den and about her friend Kelly whom he loosed. No doubt it's shocking news for Sue, but on the other hand Alec feels a sense of lightness or joy as he encounters with his real self after very long time.

For Sue, it's an extreme sense of betrayal by the person whom she loves and is ready to leave everything for him: "Don't touch me... You've been lying to me all along". (*The Soul of All Great Designs*, 219) When Alec blames her for lying with her parents, her anger and sense of betrayal grows, and she orders Alec to stop the car and running out of car through the dark, deserted street. For Alec, Sue is being unreasonable, and the fear of manhandling with his 'secrets' propels in his mind and to save his secrets, he kills Sue with his car. Ironically, the murder is reported as a hit – and – run case and Alec has no fear of being caught by police, as his car is not registered and there is no witness.

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